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THE CORNPLANTER INDIAN

There are probably few Pennsylvanians who know that the State possesses an Indian population, and yet the last remnants of its aboriginal red men are to be found isolated on a few hundred acres of land in Warren County, near the headwaters of the Allegheny River. It is true, that less than half a hundred Cornplanters, descendants of the great chieftain and friend of the white man, Chief Cornplanter, are now residing within the limits of the land presented to their forebearer by the Commonwealth. Probably five hundred others, however, have some claim to this land and would perhaps still be occupying it had greater opportunities for self improvement been available. The tiny settlement has a church and a school, and this is about all that the Commonwealth has ever done to improve the lot of those who were once the first Pennsylvanians. The tract occupied by the Cornplanters is almost inaccessible in terms of modern transportation. In fact, it is difficult to reach it without crossing into New York, and even then one must traverse several miles of supremely poor dirt road in order to visit the Pennsylvania red men. It is little wonder that few inhabitants of the State are aware either of the existence of the Cornplanters or know of their whereabouts.

Origin of Cornplanter Tract

In the frequent references made to the Cornplanters, the tract in Warren County is often referred to as a "reservation." This has led some to think of the area as a part of the Federal Indian reservation system or a portion of the better known Seneca tract in southern New York, just across the state line near Salamanca. As a matter of fact, the Cornplanters occupy their land by virtue of special action taken by the General Assembly of Pennsylvania in 1791. At this time, in recognition of his great services to the cause of peace between white and red men, the famous Seneca, Cornplanter, was granted a large tract of land in this, then undeveloped, frontier area. A little later, in order to protect the Indian owners, legislation

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was passed prohibiting the disposal of any portion of the property outside the Cornplanter heirs. Years later, shortly after 1860, showing that the memory of Cornplanter and his services had not yet died, the Commonwealth erected on the tract in the cemetery which had become the last resting place of Cornplanter and many other of his great chieftains, a handsome Cornplanter monument.

Indians Later Neglected

As the years passed, however, the Commonwealth lost interest in the future of its friends. As facilities for transportation improved, Cornplanter's lands were passed by and the river became almost the sole means of contact with the neighboring white settlements. In contrast, the Seneca lands in New York, a few miles across the border, were bisected with modern highways, and at least one important city was built upon Seneca property providing opportunities for a decent livelihood, which were increasingly denied their Pennsylvania brethern. Today, some of the most influential Cornplanters reside in New York where they are substantial and influential Cornplanters reside in New York where they are substantial and influential citizens. They still possess, however, a remarkable sentimental attachment to their Pennsylvania homelands. Despite years of neglect of their welfare, they still consider themselves as Pennsylvanians and often return for at least a short residence on the old Cornplanter lands.

Kinzua Dam Project

Today, however, there is presented to the people of Pennsylvania, and their Assembly, a problem which promises to force the Cornplanter Indians into the public eye. The upper Allegheny will be the center of a gigantic flood control project of the Federal government. In order to control the floods which have swept down the Ohio and Mississippi with increasing destructive power during the last decade, it is deemed necessary to construct a huge dam at the headwaters of the Allegheny. It will be one of several located between Warren and Pittsburgh in an effort to tame the

destroying flood waters which the historic Allegheny pours into its junction with the Monongahela to form the mighty Ohio at that city. The lands of the Cornplanters and the historic Indian cemetery and monument to Cornplanter all will be inundated by the projected huge Kinzua reservoir extending from Warren, Pennsylvania, to Salamanca in New York.

The Cornplanter Problem

All of this presents certain problems to Washington in terms of the equally threatened Seneca lands in New York, but Harrisburg will need to take official cognizance of its original grant to Cornplanter and his descendants. It seems apparent that an act of the General Assembly will be needed to authorize disposal of these lands. More important to Pennsylvania, however, is the question of where the Cornplanters will find domicile. Will they remain on Pennsylvania soil, or will they join their Seneca brethern on lands which may be found for them in New York. If the latter course is taken, will they take with them the remains of Chief Cornplanter and other Indian leaders prominent in Pennsylvania history? A majority of the Cornplanters, if should be noted, desire to find a home in the Keystone state.

An increasing number of prominent persons are taking an interest in this aspect of the problem. Historically, Pennsylvania would lose much and New York would be the beneficiary should the Cornplanters move to the Empire State. Economically, it would undoubtedly lose a potential and as yet undeveloped tourist attraction of the first magnitude. Were the Indians provided with suitable land in Pennsylvania, within reach of centers of population and with improved roads, there is little doubt but that numbers of them who have deserted the present run-down "reservation" would return. Given an opportunity, the Cornplanters should be able to redevelop tribal arts and handicrafts and revive their picturesque ceremonials. These would be of tremendous interest to the tourist and furnish an attraction which could be advertised widely without unduly exploiting the Indians, and provide them with economic opportunities and consequent social advantages which have long been denied.

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Cornplanter Committee

The Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies decided recently that this peculiar problem in northwestern Pennsylvania was of such importance as to deserve careful attention. Accordingly, a statewide committee has been appointed to study the situation, arouse public interest, and make positive recommendations wherever and whenever necessary. Mr. M. H. Deardorff, prominent Warren banker and historian, in close touch with the problem locally, is acting as chairman. Other members include Mr. Robert S. Bates, Meadville; Mr. Franklin F. Holbrook, Pittsburgh; Mrs. L. L. Hunter, Tidioute; Mr. M. I. McCreight, Dubois; Mr. Gregg L. Neel, Pittsburgh; Dr. John W. Oliver, Pittsburgh; Mr. J. Elmer Reed, Erie; Col. Henry W. Shoemaker, Harrisburg; Mr. H. K. Siebeneck, Pittsburgh; Mr. John Siggins, Jr., Harrisburg; Hon. Edward Lindsey, Warren, and Mr. Ross Pier Wright of Erie, chairman of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, Mr. Sylvester K. Stevens, Federation secretary and Commission historian, together with Dr. Roy F. Nichols, Philadelphia, president of the Federation, are acting as ex officio members and advisers of the committee. It is expected, confidently, that a solution to the problem will be found and that it will protect the interests of Pennsylvania.